

Hundreds rally in Dominican Republic for recognition as citizens

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic - Hundreds of Haitian descendants born and raised in the Dominican Republic rallied in front of government offices, demanding to be recognized as Dominican citizens.

The Dec. 8 demonstration sought to call attention to the tens of thousands of people of Haitian descent whom human rights groups say have been left functionally stateless by a Dominican government policy that refuses them access to a copy of their birth certificate.

Without the birth certificate, they cannot receive an identity card.

“They can’t access health services or schooling. They can’t get married legally or travel out of the country,” said Francisco Renaldo. The lawyer works with Movimiento reconocido, a coalition of human rights groups organized by the Jesuit-run Centro Pedro Francisco Bono to pressure the Dominican government to stop stripping residents of their citizenship.

Dominican authorities have acknowledged that some residents are not receiving copies of birth certificates as they attempt to modernize the country’s antiquated civil registry system. But they deny allegations that the policy is racially charged, targeting Haitian descendants. The civil registry office did not return Catholic News Service’s calls for comment Dec. 8.

The Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, has long attracted Haitians, first to cut sugar cane and more recently as laborers in construction and other fields.

Until recently, the children of those immigrants, many born into impoverished conditions in sugar worker villages known as bateyes, were automatically granted citizenship due to their place of birth. But starting in 2004, through new laws and regulations and, later, with a new constitution, the Dominican government began revoking the citizenship of children of Haitians.

The policy is being applied to children born after 2004 and retroactively to people born years and decades before the new rules went into effect.

The week preceding the rally, the Dominican Supreme Court upheld one of the more controversial measures used to deny birth certificates.

After losing the case in the Supreme Court, the Centro Pedro Francisco Bono is considering taking its case to the Washington-based Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

While the issue is longstanding, the rally marked the first time 20 different organizations working on the issue came together with a major public event, said Juan Carlos Gonzalez, spokesman for the Bono center.

Under a scorching Caribbean sun with Dominican police holding riot shields across the street, demonstrators held up signs that read, "I am Dominican." The event was peaceful.

Altagracia Yean, who was born in a batey to Haitian parents, said she was denied documents even though she was born two decades before the new citizenship laws were passed. Without a copy of her birth certificate, Yean said she was told she could not attend school.

"I'm a foreigner in any other country, but I was born here. I'm a Dominican," she told the crowd. "Just as I never gave up my dream to go to school, the fight of our people endures."

Several who attended said they'd received their documents but knew someone who had not.

"I have had mine since I was a child," said Karina De La Rosa Pie. "But I'm here to show solidarity with those that don't have papers. It's wrong. We're all Dominicans."

The rally took on added significance due to the recent death of human rights activist Solange "Sonia" Pierre, who spent her career advocating for Haitian immigrants and their children. Pierre died Dec. 4 of a heart attack at the age of 48.

Her work through the Movement for Dominican Women of Haitian Descent won her widespread recognition, including the 2006 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. It also brought her criticism and threats against her life in the Dominican Republic.

Demonstrators waved posters with her likeness and the words “We’re all Dominicans, Sonia Pierre.”

Her son, Carlos Ernesto Pierre, said his mother had endured two heart surgeries and was taking medication, yet her untimely death was a shock.

“We’re all still very saddened by it,” he told Catholic News Service. “But we’re here today to further the cause. We’re going to continue the fight even if she’s not here.”